

Welsh Patronymics

Welsh genealogy is a uniquely difficult field. This is largely due to the use of patronymics (“pater”=father, “nemo”=name), which shrinks the number of surnames in the country and makes it harder to differentiate between people. Although patronymics can often be predictable, there are always exceptions that take practice to recognize.

Objectives

To learn about the origin and development of surnames and patronymics; to place that information in a Welsh context to understand the impact patronymics have had on Welsh family history; and to learn how to recognize Welsh patronymic surnames and what they mean.

Why is Wales So Difficult?

- There is a smaller pool of surnames due to the use of patronymics, making people with identical names more frequent.
- Wales transitioned to hereditary surnames over the course of 250 years, making it challenging to determine when a specific family began using a fixed surname.
- Patronymic names can be difficult to recognize because there are many exceptions to the patterns of patronymic naming.

Smaller Surname Pool

There are four steps to the shrinking of available Welsh names:

1. The transition from Welsh given names to Anglo-Norman given names
2. Naming patterns mean that more common names get used a lot, while less common names die out
3. Patronymic surnames are derived from a small pool of given names
4. The surname distribution of Wales is heavily weighted toward a few, extremely common surnames

In the 1830s, 55% of Welsh families had the surnames Jones, Williams, Davies, Thomas, Evans, Roberts, Hughes, Lewis, Morgan, or Griffiths. The 100 most common surnames covered 90% of the population.

Anglo-Norman Impact

As English power spread, the people close to that power began shifting from the patronymic tradition to hereditary surnames in order to appear more English. This could mean that they were in power themselves, or that they were in an area with prevalent English influence and populations. As such, the decline of patronymics was highly localized, but spread over a few hundred years, making it unwise to assign an “end” to patronymics.

“The higher up the heap and the nearer to English influence you were, the quicker you made yourself look less Welsh.”

n.b. For the map of patronymic decline used in the presentation, see *The Surnames of Wales* by John and Sheila Rowlands.

Patterns Not Rules

Era	Sons	Daughters
Ancient Welsh	"Mab" meaning son	"Ferch" meaning daughter
Medieval tradition	Llywelyn ab Ieuan ap Gruffydd (up to seven generations)	Gwynhwyfar verch Rhys ap Tudur
Early Modern	John ap Henry OR John Parry OR John Harries	Mary verch David OR Mary vch David OR Mary Davies
Mid-1800s	"Ap" and "ab" are rarely seen, surnames look like given names, often ending in -s	"Verch" and "vch" are rarely seen, surnames look like given names, often ending in -s

Things to Remember

- There is no firm date for when patronymics stopped in Wales, but the decay of patronymics was often highly localized.
- Even within a single family, people stopped using patronymics at different times and could restart utilizing patronymics after an earlier generation adopted a fixed surname.
- Similarly, children within the same family could use a fixed surname, a patronymic from their father's name, or a patronymic from their grandfather's name.
- Given names with multiple patronymic derivatives can show localized favoritism toward a specific derivative, for example, Roberts has very high concentrations in the north, while Probert typically occurs in the south.
- Women did not always take their husband's name after marriage.

Resources

- Rowlands, John and Sheila. *The Surnames of Wales: For Family Historians and Others*. Genealogical Publishing Company. 2014.
- Hayes, Dafydd. "Patronymic Paranoia." <http://www.clwydfhs.org.uk/helachau/patronymics.htm>
- Foster, Craig L. "Welsh Naming Patterns and Customs." <https://www.familysearch.org/en/help/helpcenter/lessons/welsh-naming-patterns-and-customs>
- "The History of Welsh Surnames." <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofWales/The-History-of-Welsh-Surnames/>